

A New Arms Race? Explaining Recent Southeast Asian Military Acquisitions

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There is growing concern that Southeast Asia is in the midst of a regional arms race. Certainly many nations in the region have been on a veritable “shopping spree” for advanced conventional weaponry, and this has been enabled by a corresponding increase in military spending. However, these acquisitions do not fit the pattern of an “arms race” as laid out in prevailing theory: mutually adversarial relationships, explicit tit-for-tat arms acquisitions, the intention of seeking dominance over one’s rivals through arming and intimidation, etc. Additionally, the actual numbers of arms being acquired are, for the most part, relatively small. That said, the regional re-arming process is significant in that the types of arms being acquired go beyond the “mere modernization” of regional armed forces and could greatly change the nature and character of potential regional conflicts. The resulting arms competition, or “arms dynamic”, has at least the potential to contribute to a classical “security dilemma”, a situation whereby actions taken by a country can actually undermine the security and stability that they were meant to increase.

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Is Southeast Asia currently in the grip of a regional arms race? On the surface, there are five main empirical developments that may suggest that the possibility for such an arms race is overwhelming

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and ominous. First, Singapore has recently acquired F-15 jet fighters from the United States, while Malaysia and Indonesia have bought Su-30s from Russia, and Thailand has ordered Gripens from Sweden. Second, Singapore and Malaysia have all bought new or additional submarines, which in Singapore's case have been outfitted with advanced propulsion systems for long endurance, submerged operations. Vietnam has reportedly signed a contract with Russia for the supply of 6 *Kilo-class* submarines. Third, in 2002, Malaysia ordered 63 heavy main battle tanks from Poland; in an apparent attempt to match this purchase, Singapore in 2007 bought approximately 100 German-made Leopard-2 tanks. Fourth, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand have all recently placed large orders for modern armoured personnel carriers (APCs) from a variety of domestic and foreign suppliers. Fifth, Singapore matched Malaysia's purchase of the ASTROS-II multiple rocket launcher (MLR) from Brazil by acquiring the HIMARS (MRL) system from the United States.

These recent arms purchases have been accompanied by a significant growth in regional defence spending. According to data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Malaysia's military budget more than doubled between 2000 and 2008, from US\$1.7 billion to \$3.5 billion (as measured in constant 2005 dollars). Indonesian defence spending over the same period went from \$2.2 billion to \$3.8 billion, a 72 per cent increase, while Thailand increased military expenditure by 43 per cent, from \$2.1 billion to \$3 billion. Singapore's defence budget rose 26 per cent, from \$4.6 billion in 2000, to \$5.8 billion in 2008 (again, in constant 2005 dollars — in current dollars, Singapore's 2008 military budget totalled around \$7.5 billion). Altogether, regional military spending rose by at least 50 per cent in real terms between 2000 and 2008.¹

Certainly these developments could be interpreted as pointing to a rather disturbing trend in the regional security calculus. Some have even argued that Southeast Asia could be in the midst of a new, potentially destabilizing arms race.² Consequently, calls to limit arms transfers to the region or to encourage local authorities to practice self-restraint when it comes to defence acquisition, so as to reign in or reverse this supposed arms race, have taken on more salience in recent years.

Is it accurate to describe these recent arms acquisitions as a genuine arms race? In fact, this is unlikely, as they do not meet the requirements of an arms race as laid out by leading theories of such behaviour. If not an arms race *per se*, however, then how

can we explain this current process? The intensity and pattern of reciprocal arms acquisitions among certain Southeast Asian nations is clearly more significant than just replacing old military equipment with new systems, given the ratcheting-up in military capabilities that comes with these purchases. As such, the resulting tit-for-tat arms competition, which itself may be the result of an “arms dynamic”, as described by Buzan and Herring,³ is no less worrisome and potentially destabilizing, over the long run, when it comes to regional security.

Recent Southeast Asian Arms Acquisitions

As mentioned, many Southeast Asian militaries have been on a veritable shopping spree over the past decade. In addition to advanced “fourth-generation” or “four generation-plus” fighters, submarines and main battles tanks, countries in the region have acquired modern air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons, large surface combatants, amphibious assault vessels, anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), and new command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems. At this juncture, therefore, it would be useful to examine specific arms acquisitions by the major nations in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia

Indonesia has in recent years begun to emerge from the economic constraints of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s in order to start investing additional resources into recapitalizing its armed forces. The armed forces of Indonesia (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* or TNI) are mostly committed to internal security and protection of the country’s sizeable (over six million square kilometres) Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Consequently, when it comes to military capabilities, particular priority has been given to meeting air and sea-based maritime border threats, and the TNI have put considerable emphasis on the task of patrolling and protecting the vast Indonesian archipelago.⁴

The naval branch of the TNI is dedicated to building a “green-water” capacity by 2020, and it is consequently consolidating the size of its naval task force by phasing out obsolete ships (i.e., the large fleet of East German frigates and corvettes acquired in the early 1990s) and replacing them with newer and more capable vessels.⁵ For example, Jakarta has recently acquired four new *Sigma*-class

corvettes from the Netherlands, at least one Korean-built landing dock platform (LDP) amphibious support ship, and has outfitted its warships with French Exocet and Chinese C-802 ASCMs. Older ships are being converted to patrol boats, forward operating bases are being established in the eastern part of the archipelago, new maritime patrol aircraft are being acquired and the TNI Marine Forces are being expanded and strengthened.⁶

At one time, Indonesia had announced its intention to acquire four *Kilo*-class and two *Lada*-class submarines from Russia, to replace its two ageing German-built Type-209 boats; this deal appears to have fallen through though as the two sides failed to agree on financing arrangements.⁷ Nevertheless, Indonesia still has an outstanding requirement for submarines, and it has considered buying submarines from Germany, South Korea, or France, in addition to Russia.⁸

The TNI Air Force (TNI-AU) is still relatively small, with just 72 frontline aircraft, mostly ageing F-16s and F-5E/Fs, a handful of Russian Su-27s and Su-30s, and 35 BAE Systems Hawk advanced trainer jets (which can also be used for ground attack).⁹ A 1997 decision to purchase 24 Su-30 fighter-bombers had to be cancelled in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, but in 2003, Jakarta, armed with a \$1 billion export credit from Russia, finally signed a deal to buy 2 Su-27s and 2 Su-30s, and an additional 6 Sukhois were acquired in 2009; the TNI-AU hopes to eventually purchase up to 40 Su-27/ Su-30 aircraft.¹⁰

TNI ground forces modernization has been comparatively minor, with the recent acquisition of Russian BTR-80 APCs and some used Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters. Additionally, the Indonesian arms industry, under the auspices of PT Pindad, manufactures the *Panser* 6x6 wheeled APC, and licence-produces the Belgian FNC assault rifle, as well as submachine guns from Italy, mortars from Finland and Israel, and grenade launchers from Singapore.

Malaysia

The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) has been transitioning from a counter-insurgency force to a more conventional one since the late 1980s. This process is driven by new security requirements, including the protection of EEZs in surrounding waters, safeguarding the Malacca Straits from terrorism and piracy, and growing concerns over heightened Chinese military activities in the South

China Sea. Kuala Lumpur is placing greater emphasis on increasing capabilities in the area of firepower and force projection, joint-service operations and long-range surveillance and intelligence. In this regard, in 2005 Malaysia established a coast guard – the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) – which is tasked with patrolling Malaysia's territorial waters (including the Malacca Straits) and EEZ.¹¹

Malaysia is in the midst of a multi-year programme to expand and modernize its armed forces, embodied in the VMAF21 (Versatile Malaysian Armed Forces of the 21st Century) programme, and supported by national development programmes initiated under the Eighth and the Ninth Malaysia Plans (2000-05 and 2006-10, respectively). Consequently, since 2000, Kuala Lumpur has undertaken a flurry of big-ticket procurement programmes, including the purchase of main battle tanks, multiple rocket launchers (MRLs), APCs, fighter jets, long-range transport aircraft, submarines and patrol corvettes. Malaysia is one of the largest arms buyers in Southeast Asia, and Kuala Lumpur has bought over \$5 billion worth of arms since the late 1990s.¹²

In 2003, the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) ordered 18 Su-30MKM Flankers from Russia — at a cost of \$900 million — to complement its existing force of 18 MiG-29 Fulcrums (which are armed with the active radar-guided AA-12 air-to-air missiles), 8 F/A-18Ds, 13 F-5E/Fs and 25 Hawk trainer/ground attack aircraft.¹³ The MiG-29s are scheduled to be deactivated in a few years, and the F-5s are thought to be currently non-operational. The RMAF may also buy another 18 fighter aircraft (either the F/A-18F or additional Su-30s) and up to 4 Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft (either the B-737 Wedgetail, the E-2C Hawkeye or the Swedish Ericsson Erieye). Other acquisitions include 4 Airbus A400M military transport aircraft and possibly Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM).¹⁴

Kuala Lumpur has recently taken delivery of 2 Franco-Spanish *Scorpene*-class submarines for the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN), both of which were commissioned in 2009. Other recent RMN acquisitions include 6 German-designed MEKO A100 offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) and 2 British-built *Lekiu*-class frigates.

Finally, the Malaysian army is acquiring 48 PT-91M Twardy main battle tanks (based on the Russian T-72) from Poland, along with 15 support vehicles, infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) from Turkey and South Korea, self-propelled artillery systems from South Africa, and the ASTROS-II multiple rocket launcher from Brazil.

Myanmar

After the 1988 military coup, Myanmar undertook a major expansion of its armed forces, although much of this build-up was admittedly more quantitative than qualitative.¹⁵ The army is the largest contingent in the Myanmar armed forces (*Tatmadaw*), comprising perhaps 400,000 soldiers, but it is still mostly structured and armed for counter-insurgency operations and for preserving military control over the country.¹⁶ Most of its equipment purchases (dating from the 1980s and 1990s) have come from China (e.g., Type-69II tanks, Type-63 light tanks, Type-85 APCs, etc.), although the country is also manufacturing (under a Ukrainian licence) the BTR-3U wheeled APC in significant numbers.

The Myanmar Air Force has recapitalized itself mainly through the acquisition of Chinese fighter aircraft, which are based in turn on old Soviet designs. The air force has acquired approximately 60 Chinese-made F-7Ms, derived from the MiG-21, as well as 42 A-5s, a modified version of the MiG-19 optimized for ground attack. In addition, it has bought G4 Super Galeb trainer/ground attack aircraft from the former Yugoslavia and K-8 primary trainer jets (also usable for light ground attack) from China. More recently, the air force purchased 10 second-hand MiG-29 fighters (8 single-seat and 2 dual-seat trainers) from Russia in 2001 for \$130 million; these aircraft were supplemented with an order in late 2009 for 20 more MiG-29s.¹⁷

The Myanmar Navy is comprised mainly of patrol craft and corvettes, mostly of Chinese origin. A purportedly planned purchase of three frigates from China never materialized, however, although Myanmar did recently launch the locally built *Aung Zay Ya* frigate, which is outfitted with the Chinese C-802 ASCMs, and it is currently constructing an indigenous type of corvette.¹⁸

Singapore

Singapore's interest in maintaining a high-tech military stems both from its strategic weaknesses and its economic and technological advantages. Consequently, Singapore is currently engaged in a "third-generation" (3G) transformation of its military. The interests of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) in defence transformation stems from three factors. First, a perception of unconventional threats — such as terrorism, piracy, insurrection and destabilization in a neighbouring state — resulting in new types of warfare, like urban warfare and the need to protect key installations. Second, Singapore's traditional

strategic weaknesses owing to its lack of strategic depth, a small and ageing population and relatively limited defence resources. Third, Singapore's highly educated workforce and its strengths in information technology, which the SAF sees as a critical force multiplier.¹⁹

Accordingly, Singapore's transformational efforts — designated the Integrated Knowledge-based Command and Control (IKC2) doctrinal concept — emphasize the acquisition, development and integration of technologies for command and control with ISR systems and precision-guided weapons. IKC2 and 3G areas, where the SAF is currently focusing much of its efforts, include advanced electronics and signal processing, information systems security, advanced guidance systems, communications, electronic warfare, sensors and unmanned vehicles. Additionally, the SAF has either acquired or is in the process of acquiring several new types of systems for force projection, enhanced mobility and increased firepower.

The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) has also expanded substantially over the past decade. In particular, it has recently put into service six *Formidable*-class frigates, which are based on the French-designed *Lafayette*-class “stealth” frigate. These frigates will mainly be used to patrol sea lines of communication (SLOCs) around Singapore and will be armed with Harpoon ASCM and the French Aster-15 air-defence missile, which is capable of providing anti-ballistic missile defence. Just as important, the *Formidable*-class frigate will be equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and combat management and communications systems, and thus will constitute a “key node” in Singapore's 3G capability programme and consequently “push the *regional* envelope of naval capabilities ... in their undoubted networking capabilities”.²⁰

Besides these new frigates, in the mid-1990s the RSN has also bought four used submarines from Sweden, renamed the *Challenger* class. In 2009, Singapore took delivery of two more Swedish *Västergötland*-class submarines; significantly, these boats, renamed the *Archer*-class, have been retrofitted with the Stirling engine for air-independent propulsion (AIP), permitting them to remain submerged for much longer periods of time than conventional battery-powered diesel-electric submarines. These new submarines are the first in Southeast Asia to be outfitted with AIP.²¹

Finally, the RSN has since the turn of the century operated 2 indigenously designed and constructed *Endurance*-class landing ships, each capable of carrying 350 troops, 18 tanks, 4 helicopters and 4 landing craft.

The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) is the most advanced in Southeast Asia. The RSAF has, over the past decade, acquired 74 F-16s of the latest “Block 52/52+” type (roughly a dozen of these aircraft are permanently based in the United States for advanced flight training). In 2005, the RSAF placed its first order of F-15SG fighters, for a total of 24 aircraft, the first 12 of which have been delivered and are stationed in the United States for training purposes.²² Additionally, the SAF possesses a wide variety of sophisticated air-carried munitions, including the AIM-9X Sidewinder, Israeli Python IV and US AMRAAM missiles, and the GPS-guided JDAM and JSOW air-to-ground weapons. The RSAF also operates 9 tanker aircraft for air-to-air refueling, greatly increasing the range of its fighters, and it is replacing its E-2C Hawkeye AEW aircraft with 4 Gulfstream G550s, outfitted with the Israeli Phalcon active phased array radar.²³ Singapore has also ordered 20 AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters (which are flown by the RSAF), the first of which were deployed in 2006.

Finally, Singapore is the only Southeast Asian partner in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) programme, a highly advanced “fifth-generation” fighter jet. The JSF is being developed and manufactured under a unique multinational programme led by the United States and involves ten partnering countries, including Singapore. The RSAF will likely order several dozen JSFs to replace or augment its F-16 force.²⁴

For its part, the Singapore Army is being upgraded with recently acquired German Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks, the US HIMARS truck-mounted multiple rocket system, and the indigenously produced Bionix IFV and Terrex wheeled APC. In addition, Singapore, through its advanced indigenous defence industry, is largely self-sufficient when it comes to small arms and ground ordnance, such as artillery systems, ammunition and assault rifles.

Thailand

Until quite recently, Thai military modernization was stymied by a lack of consistent funding. According to assessments made by the Australian Defence Intelligence Organization (DIO), the Thai defence budget fell by more than 30 per cent between 1996 and 1999 as a result of the Asian financial crisis.²⁵ Just prior to the September 2006 coup, however, military expenditures began to rebound. In 2006, defence spending was approximately \$2.4 billion, and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had approved a long-term

modernization spending plan totalling \$6.6 billion between 2005 and 2015, along with adding approximately 20 billion baht (nearly \$700 million) a year to the defence budget. New equipment to be procured included fighter aircraft, transport helicopters, main battle tanks, APCs, self-propelled artillery, air defence systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), frigates, OPVs, training simulators, search and rescue (SAR) aircraft, and improvements to the military's command, control, communications, computing and intelligence (C4I) network — in other words, nearly everything.²⁶

Despite being more of a land power, Thailand has considerable maritime interests, including the protection of offshore oil and gas reserves, counter-terrorism, counter-piracy and countering illegal trafficking in its territorial waters.²⁷ The Royal Thai Navy (RTN), therefore, has considerable responsibility in providing littoral and EEZ maritime security. More recently, the RTN has acquired new and used frigates from the United States and Britain, as well as two OPVs from China.²⁸ The RTN has expressed interest in acquiring submarines but current budget constraints have made this unlikely for the near future.²⁹

It is worth noting that the RTN operates the only aircraft carrier in the region — the 10,000-ton, Spanish-built *Chakri Nareubet*, which is outfitted with nine used AV-8A Harrier jump jets and six S-70B Seahawk helicopters. The carrier is intended for air defence and anti-submarine operations during wartime and disaster relief during peacetime. Since the *Chakri Nareubet* was delivered to the RTN in 1997, however, it has spent most of its time in port due to high operating costs, though it was employed in relief operations in the wake of the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.

The Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) has suffered from a continued shortage of funding following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, inter-service rivalries and a priority on expanding the country's sea power.³⁰ At one time during the late 1990s, the RTAF had intended to purchase F/A-18 fighters, but this order was cancelled in the wake of the financial crisis. Later efforts to acquire "C/D" versions of the F-16 were also abandoned in favour of buying additional (used but refurbished) F-16A/Bs. In 2007, however, the RTAF finally decided to buy six (later raised to twelve) Gripen fighter jets from Sweden.

Recent Thai Army purchases include the Israeli TAR-21 assault rifle, the Russian M-17 helicopter, the French CAESAR 155mm truck-mounted artillery, and South African REVA and Ukrainian BTR-3E1 APCs.

Vietnam

Vietnam has obvious interests in protecting its maritime EEZ resources and enforcing its territorial claims in the disputed Spratly Islands. After years of neglect, the country is beginning to rearm itself and as a result has begun to increase defence spending and procurement.³¹ The Vietnamese navy has done particularly well out of this increased emphasis on self-reliant defence and it has greatly enhanced its capabilities in recent years. The navy is currently acquiring 3 new corvettes, outfitted with German engines and British and American radars, as well as up to a dozen *Svetlyak*-class fast-attack craft patrol vessels and various second hand surface combatants from South Korea and Poland. Hanoi also signed a major arms deal with Poland in 2005 for 10 maritime patrol M-28 aircraft and 40 surplus Su-22M aircraft. In addition, Vietnam is building up to 40 new indigenous 400-ton offshore patrol vessels and 6 150-ton coastal patrol boats.³²

Of particular note, the navy has recently announced its intention to buy 6 *Kilo*-class diesel-electric submarines from Russia, at a cost of \$2 billion.³³ Integrating these vessels into the navy is likely to prove an enormous challenge as it currently operates only 2 mini-sub subs acquired from North Korea over a decade ago.³⁴

At the same time, the Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) remains a large but obsolete force as it is mostly comprised of Vietnam War-era MiG-21s and Su-22s. The VPAF has been trying to modernize its arsenal since the early 1990s, buying Sukhoi Su-27 fighter aircraft in the mid-1990s, and then the more capable Su-30MKK in 2003, but this process has been slow and modest. Up until 2009, it has procured only 12 Su-27s (3 of which have crashed) and just 12 Su-30MKKs, although it recently announced that it might buy an additional dozen Su-30s.³⁵

Explaining Southeast Asian Arms Acquisitions

It is obvious that Southeast Asia has experienced a significant expansion in the purchase and deployment of advanced conventional weaponry of all types. But what does it mean? One possible explanation, of course, is that this current phenomenon constitutes a genuine arms race; another is that it is simply part of the normal process of recurrent, rolling recapitalization of regional armed forces, and a relatively restrained one at that. A third and more accurate explanation, however, is that the region is caught up in a regional

“arms dynamic”, i.e., a regional arms competition that falls somewhere short of a true arms race, but which is more extensive than “mere” modernization.

A Genuine Arms Race?

It would be tempting perhaps to simply dismiss the current process of arms acquisitions in Southeast Asia as an “arms race”. Arms races have a pleasing parsimony to them: they are part of an action-reaction cycle of tit-for-tat weapons acquisitions that seems self-explanatory and simple to comprehend: Country A buys a particular piece of military hardware, which is matched by Country B, and so on and so on. In addition, arms races offer its participants a handy way to rationalize their behaviour, since they often seem to take on a life of their own: it is not the fault of the participants, they are simply caught up in a vicious circle from which they are unable to escape without grievously harming national security.³⁶

However, calling the current process of Southeast Asian arms acquisitions an arms race, without defining what an “arms race” is, would be an intellectual deceit. In fact, simply describing the action-reaction cycle of arms acquisitions as an arms race borders on tautology: two or more countries are in an arms race because they are each buying arms. Obviously, for the process to constitute an “arms race”, it has to involve other factors as well. According to Colin Grey, for example, an arms race must entail the following four attributes: first, the existence of two or more parties, conscious of their mutual antagonism and of being in a mutually adversarial relationship; second, the conscious structuring of military forces by both parties with a “general attention” towards the political and military behaviour of the other party; third, competition between them (presumably explicit) regarding quantity and quality (i.e., capabilities) in terms of their respective military acquisitions; and finally, each party must increase or improve their armaments at a “rapid” rate.³⁷ Gray bluntly asserts “all four of these factors must be present for there to be any valid assertion that a particular relationship is an arms race”.³⁸

Grant Hammond is even more precise than Gray. For Hammond, an arms race occurs in (1) a primarily bilateral relationship, (2) where each party specifically designates the other to be an adversary, (3) where a high degree of public animosity and antagonism exists between the two parties, (4) where each party’s military/political planning is *directly* based on the capabilities and intentions of the other

party, (5) entailing “extraordinary and consistent increases” in military spending and arms acquisitions, (6) with the intention of seeking dominance over one’s rival through intimidation.³⁹ At the same time, arms races are too often based on negative inferences regarding an adversary’s intentions, which can lead to misperceiving an adversary’s actions in favour of seeing bellicosity, or discounting positive, benign overtures.

Arms races therefore can seriously disturb or even exacerbate regional or bilateral military balances, leading to more insecurity and instability in the region. In this regard, the spread of the most advanced conventional weapons could have an adverse effect on regional security environments where tensions are already high. Illustrative of this process is the arms race between China and Taiwan. Beijing’s growing arsenal of modern warships, submarines, fighter aircraft, and precision-guided munitions has certainly increased Taiwan’s threat perceptions of China, and it has fuelled Taipei’s counter-acquisition of new air and missile defences, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare systems, and counter-landing weapons. Yet, as these militaries become more capable, the situation across the Taiwan Straits has not necessarily become less tense — just the opposite, in fact, as the armed forces on both sides continue to test each other’s strengths and weaknesses in the straits. Such concerns are only multiplied when one considers the types of military systems being acquired — transformational weapons that promise to fundamentally change the conduct of warfare and which could greatly increase its destructiveness.

However, if we apply these requirements to the current process of arms acquisitions in Southeast Asia, then it is most certainly *not* an arms race. While the nations of the region may certainly have their historical enmities and mutual suspicions, they are not presently — nor have they been for many years — in a state of “a high degree of public animosity and antagonism”, notwithstanding recent tensions between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple. In fact, it could be argued that Southeast Asia has never been more stable and free of conflict. There are no major territorial conflicts ongoing in the region, and while there certainly are disputes over issues such as overlapping EEZs and the Spratlys, these hardly meet the standard of a “mutually adversarial relationship”. In fact, it is more likely that the Southeast Asian nations are arming themselves against extra-regional powers, specifically China.⁴⁰ This is certainly the case when it comes to Vietnam’s current arms acquisition efforts. In addition, the countries of Southeast Asia go out of their way to

profess their good neighbourliness and desire to conduct regional relations on the basis of non-interference and the peaceful settlement of disputes — a rhetorical flourish, perhaps, but one that still guides public and diplomatic discourse within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is also difficult to see how states in the region are “explicitly and directly” basing their arms acquisition decision-making on the actions or intentions of their neighbours, nor is it apparent that any Southeast Asian nation is attempting to seek “dominance” over another state through “intimidation”.

Finally, the present process of arms acquisition in the region can hardly be described as “rapid” or “extensive”: some countries, such as Malaysia, have taken years to consummate arms deals, while others, such as Thailand and Indonesia, have frequently postponed or even cancelled arms acquisitions due to financial constraints or contract squabbles. In terms of numbers too, most Southeast Asian nations are hardly buying out the store when it comes to arms purchases. With the possible exception of Singapore, most countries in the region are purchasing relative handfuls of advanced conventional weaponry; Thailand, for example, has only bought 12 new Gripen fighters, Malaysia just 18 Su-30MKM Flankers, and Indonesia only 10 Sukhois — hardly a flood of acquisitions. Additionally, many countries in Southeast Asia are not even minor players in this postulated regional arms race. For example, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Timor-Leste have hardly bought any new pieces of military equipment lately; most of these countries spend very little on defence and even less on procurement. Finally, despite recent increases in the defence budgets of individual countries, Southeast Asia is still a relatively small spender when it comes to its militaries. In 2008, for example, all of Southeast Asia (population 600 million) had smaller military expenditures than South Korea (population 49 million) — \$18 billion versus \$24 billion.⁴¹

“Normal” Rearmament?

It could be argued that, as opposed to an arms race, the nations of Southeast Asia are simply engaged in the normal, cyclical process of replacing older and worn out equipment in their arsenals. Ageing weapons systems have to be replaced as they reach obsolescence or when their usage constitutes a danger to their operators (e.g., pilots dying in plane crashes, due to equipment failure). Furthermore, if this recapitalization seems “bunched up” enough to have the appearance of an arms race, then it is only because these countries

are finally getting around to arms acquisitions they have put off for many years. And considering that most of these countries are hardly replacing their older equipment on a one-for-one basis, one could even admire their restraint in arms purchases.

Finally, one should also not discount the impact of non-military influences when it comes to arms procurement decision-making, such as domestic politics or supply-side economics. Countries often buy weapons systems for which no objective military case can be made for their acquisition. Reasons may include prestige, i.e., as status symbols (e.g., Thailand's aircraft carrier) or to have something impressive to show off at national day parades (e.g., flyovers by modern jet fighters); corruption, i.e., accepting bribes from arms sellers to buy weapons, or factions within the military using their political clout to gain a lion's share of procurement funding; and availability, i.e., the current highly competitive state of the current global arms market, which has led to motivated sellers on the supply side of the arms business. In the case of this last point, while the Southeast Asian arms market is relatively small — collectively worth only a few billion dollars annually — the current “buyer's market” in arms means that no possible sale is too insignificant to be passed over. Moreover, the region is also one of more truly open and competitive markets when it comes to arms sales (compared to China or India, which mostly buy from Russia, or to Japan or South Korea, who are more or less captive markets of the US defence industry). Consequently, supplier restraint has been replaced by a readiness to sell just about every type of conventional weapon system available to the region and, in addition, to use technology transfers and offsets as inducements to make an arms sale. Such “sweetheart” deals, therefore, can have as much impact on the kind of arms Southeast Asian militaries buy as any actual threats or military requirements.

An Arms Dynamic?

A major drawback to the arms-race conceptualization is that it is overdetermined: few situations meet all the necessary criteria to constitute an “arms race”. That said, simply describing the recent spate of Southeast Asian arms acquisitions as just the recapitalization of local militaries, is equally dissatisfying. It ignores the fact that these countries are engaged in something far beyond the mere modernization of their armed forces.⁴² Instead, they have over the past decade or so added many capabilities that they did not possess earlier, including stand-off precision-strike, long-range airborne and

undersea attack, stealth, mobility and expeditionary warfare and, above all, new capacities when it comes to greatly improved command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) networks.

At the very least, these new types of armaments promise to significantly upgrade and modernize the manner of war fighting in the region. Certainly, Southeast Asian militaries are acquiring greater lethality and accuracy at greater ranges, improved battlefield knowledge and command and control, and increased operational manoeuvre and speed. “Fourth generation-plus” fighter aircraft, modern main battle tanks, ASCMs, multiple rocket launchers and stand-off precision-guided weapons (PGMs), and active radar-guided air-to-air missiles have greatly increased combat firepower and effectiveness. The addition of submarines (some outfitted with AIP) and modern surface combatants, amphibious assault ships, air-refuelled combat aircraft and transport aircraft has extended these militaries’ theoretical range of action. AEW aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have considerably expanded their capacities to “look out” over the horizon and in all three dimensions. Consequently, conflict in the region, should it occur, is likely going to be more high-tech, i.e., faster, more long distance and yet more precise, and perhaps more devastating in its effect.

In addition, some Southeast Asian militaries — particularly Singapore and possibly Malaysia or Indonesia — are acquiring the types of military equipment that, taken together, could fundamentally change the concept and conduct of warfare. In particular, systems related to precision strike, stealth and, above all, C4ISR comprise some of the key hardware ingredients essential to implementing a revolution in military affairs (RMA). Sensors, computers, communications systems, automated command and control, electronic warfare systems, advanced navigation and targeting aids and “smart” weapons can be bundled together in innovative new ways that can greatly synergize their individual effectiveness and create new “core competencies” in war-fighting. These emerging capabilities, in turn, have the potential to significantly affect strategy and operations on tomorrow’s battlefield and hence alter the determinants of critical capabilities in modern warfare. At the very least, therefore, the countries in this region increasingly possess the kernel of what is required to “transform” their militaries.

Moreover, while arms-racing theories tend to exaggerate the inherently destabilizing nature of tit-for-tat arms purchases, the acquisition-as-just-arms-modernization argument goes too far in

discounting the impact of introducing new capabilities into a particular geographical sphere. Such acquisitions are not totally neutral, and they can and do affect the regional security milieu. Such a development is closer to the Buzan and Herring's description of the "arms dynamic". For them, the arms dynamic is a state of reciprocal arms acquisitions that, as opposed to attempting to gain hegemony or superiority over a rival, are dedicated mainly to the "maintenance of the status quo".⁴³ Weapons acquisition under the arms dynamic, therefore, while resembling an arms race in many ways, is actually a "non-cataclysmic" process of arms acquisition intended to preserve "status-quo" oriented rivalries and maintain, rather than end-run, bilateral or regional military balances. To distinguish the phenomenon from an arms race, they term this process an "arms competition".

Recent arms acquisitions on the part of the Southeast Asian nations seem to fit this arms dynamic/arms competition model. While many countries in the region are buying quite sophisticated weapons, the numbers being procured do not seem to be in numbers large enough to seriously affect the regional balance of power (although Singapore may be the exception here). Many of these acquisitions could also be perceived as inherently defensive in nature, such as the purchase of new naval vessels to patrol territorial waters and enforce EEZ rights. Finally, drawing on the old adage that "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link", it should be noted that many countries in the region are still highly deficient in military equipment that would greatly enhance the fighting potential of their shiny new toys (such as acquiring new fighter aircraft, but not outfitting them with new or sufficient numbers of air-carried weapons, or not closing gaps in air defences by acquiring modern surveillance/command and control systems).

That said, the introduction of new types of arms and, therefore, unprecedented military capabilities into a region can always have unintended consequences. While perhaps not an arms *race*, an arms *competition*, under the rubric of the arms dynamic, can still result in a more insecure regional security environment. In particular, continued purchases of advanced weapon platforms may contribute to a classical "security dilemma" — a situation whereby actions taken by a country can actually undermine the security and stability that they were meant to increase. In this case, arms acquisitions by one state, even if it has no desire to threaten its neighbours, can often lead to anxieties and insecurities being felt by nearby states. Reciprocal responses by neighbouring states to "regain" security

by buying their own advanced weapons often only raise regional tensions further. Even defensively oriented weapons purchases, such as air defences or lightly armed offshore patrol vessels, may be perceived as threatening, as they could conceivably be employed in anti-access/area denial operations in the event of conflict. Finally, even if such tit-for-tat arms purchases do not lead to conflict, they can reinforce mutual insecurities and suspicions, and ultimately have a deleterious impact on regional security.

Moreover, without necessarily leading to arms races, these new arms competitions can still be very expensive and ultimately even imprudent. Of course, such weapons purchases can be seen as siphoning scarce government funding away from more urgent social needs, such as education, health, and economic development. However, it is also legitimate to question whether some of these countries actually “need” such increasingly sophisticated armaments, especially when military budgets are small and when such monies could be spent on meeting other, more pressing defence requirements. Does Thailand have a legitimate military requirement for an aircraft carrier, for example, especially one that was so expensive to acquire and to operate, and which is of such little strategic value?

Finally, there is the corollary issue of whether foreign arms suppliers should sell certain types of armaments — such as modern submarines or AMRAAM missiles — to countries in the region, especially when the release of such weapons systems could have far-reaching implications for regional security dynamics. Of course, supplier restraint is a difficult thing, considering the high dependency that leading arms-producing countries on weapons exports — and on arms sales to the Asia-Pacific, in particular.⁴⁴ Additionally, arms sales are a classic example of the “prisoner’s dilemma”: should the United States choose not to sell arms to Southeast Asia, for instance, other countries, such as France, Russia or China, would gladly step in to take its place. Finally, it is equally possible to argue that such arms sales may actually promote security and stability, by strengthening military alliances and aiding interoperability (for example, with US forces when it comes to peacekeeping or counter-piracy/counter-insurgency operations).

Conclusion

If Southeast Asia is in the midst of an arms dynamic, as it would appear, it may still have a deleterious effect on regional security. Relatively considerable sums of monies are being spent on weaponry,

perhaps with little regard to their actual usefulness in military situations (at least, the kind of likely military situations that would occur in the region), and the deployment of these weapons are no less potentially distressing to the regional security dynamic, especially if some event were to push the region into conflict. On the other hand, the acceptance that the region is in an arms dynamic and not an arms race means that the situation is not immutable and that the problem of arms proliferation in the region is resolvable. Whereas an arms race may appear to be an inescapable vicious circle, an arms dynamic is not, as it is more modest in its intent — i.e., the maintenance of a status quo military equilibrium — and therefore it can be more easily comprehended, bounded and constrained. The cycle can be broken or mitigated, and it is certainly within the power of the local states to do so, should they choose to do so.

NOTES

- ¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database” <<http://milexdata.sipri.org>>.
- ² See, for example, Hideaki Kaneda, “Southeast Asia’s Arms Race”, *The Asian Century*, Project Syndicate, June 2006 <<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/kaneda9/English>>; William Boot, “What’s Behind ASEAN’s Arms Race?” *The Irawaddy* 18, no. 2 (February 2010). Additionally, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, on its “Southeast Asia, Australasia and the Southwest Pacific” webpage, warns that “a new small-scale arms race has become evident with the revival of defence spending and arms procurement since 2001” <<http://www.iiss.org/programmes/south-east-asia/>>.
- ³ Barry Buzan and Eric Herring, *The Arms Dynamic in World Politics* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1998).
- ⁴ Robert Karniol, “Country Briefing: Indonesia — Interior Designs”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 7 April 2004.
- ⁵ Riefqi Muna, “Indonesia Aims for ‘Green-Water Navy’ Capability”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 27 June 2005.
- ⁶ Trefor Moss, “Painful Progress: Indonesia Country Briefing”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 16 October 2009; “Indonesia Orders Up More Maritime Patrol Aircraft”, *Defence Industry Daily*, 13 December 2009.
- ⁷ The author is grateful to Ian Storey for this insight.
- ⁸ “Russia, Korea to Fight for RI Submarine Contract”, *Jakarta Post*, 11 August 2009; “Defence Ministry Postpones Purchase of Submarines”, Antara News Agency, 29 July 2009.
- ⁹ Most US-supplied aircraft are probably non-operational, after Washington imposed an embargo on Indonesia following human rights abuses in East Timor; this embargo was lifted in 2005.

- ¹⁰ Moss, "Painful Progress", op. cit.; Andrew Tan, *Force Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia*, Working Paper No. 59 (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, January 2004), p. 17.
- ¹¹ MMEA official website <<http://www.mmea.gov.my>>.
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- ¹³ Tan, *Force Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia*, op. cit., p. 11.
- ¹⁴ Robert Karniol, "Country Briefing: Malaysia — The Big Push", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 November 2005.
- ¹⁵ Tan, *Force Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia*, op. cit., p. 18.
- ¹⁶ This size and capabilities of the *Tatmadaw* is open to considerable dispute; see Andrew Selth, "Known Knowns and Known Unknowns: Measuring Myanmar's Military Capabilities", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 2 (August 2009): 272–95.
- ¹⁷ Gareth Jennings, "Myanmar orders more MiG-29s", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 24 December 2009.
- ¹⁸ Aung Zaw, "Full Steam Ahead", *The Irrawaddy* 17, no. 5 (August 2009).
- ¹⁹ Ho Shu Huang, "The Hegemony of an Idea: The Sources of the SAF's Fascination with Technology and the Revolution in Military Affairs", Irasec Discussion Paper No. 5, 5 September 2009, pp. 5–8.
- ²⁰ Paul T. Mitchell, "Networks, Navies, Subs, and Security: ASEAN Navies in 2006", unpublished paper, October 2006, p. 3.
- ²¹ Tim Fish and Richard Scott, "Archer Launch Marks Next Step for Singapore's Submarine Force", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 18 June 2009.
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- ²⁶ Defence Intelligence Organization, *Defence Economic Trends in the Asia-Pacific 2008* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2008), pp. 19–20; Richard A. Bitzinger "Challenges Facing the Royal Thai Army Today: Between a Rock and a Hard Place?" *Asian Military Review*, November 2007.
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- ²⁹ IISS, "Responding to the Maritime Challenge", op. cit., p. 257.
- ³⁰ Tan, *Force Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia*, op. cit., p. 13.
- ³¹ Robert Karniol, "Country Briefing: Vietnam — Off the Ground", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 22 December 2005.
- ³² Ibid; IISS, "Responding to the Maritime Challenge", op. cit., p. 257.
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- ⁴² See Richard A. Bitzinger, "Come the Revolution: Transforming the Asia-Pacific's Militaries", *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2005).
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